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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the role of black experience in worldwide literature, focusing primarily on particular texts from the viewpoint of colonial whites in South Africa. Black people were represented as savages, comic buffoons, or faithful servants and slaves; all three representations dehumanized, rationalized, and justified the oppression of black people. For each new generation, the same set of social perceptions and attitudes were passed down. The late 1960s, however, saw the emergence of a new generation of children's books writers, both white and black, who broke free from the colonial tradition. Poetry has been an extremely important medium for the expression of this black experience. Although some of the poetry is finally finding its way into mainstream publishing, more is needed. (Contains 45 references.) (NAV)

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Representations of Black Experience in Literature for Young People

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REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK EXPERIENCE IN LITERATURE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Paper given at the Centre for Language in Education, University of Southampton, on 24th May 1988

Beverley Naidoo

In her foreword to an American anthology of black literature for young people entitled LISTEN CHILDREN, Coretta Scott King, widow of Martin Luther King, makes a number of important points about the relationship between literature, culture and people:

> "Literature is a unique resource that articulates and preserves a people's culture. Often it was through literature that my generation grew in our understanding of the past, so that we could gain insights into present events and develop perspectives for the future. Children need and benefit from literary experiences that develop their awareness of themselves as individuals and as part of a cultural family. The literary heritage of a people also benefits those outside that family by developing their appreciation of important differences and similarities of experience. For, although literature can never replace actual human interaction, it can deepen the understanding that comes from sharing in the common struggle for human dignity and freedom."[1]

The theme that literature is not exclusive is again taken up in the introduction by the anthology's editor, Dorothy Strickland:

> "This book is for *all* children. Yes, it is a collection of stories and experiences by black writers addressed to black children who are learning about their heritage. But it is also a collection of writing for all children learning to value themselves. In the process of growing up, understanding yourself comes with reaching out to broaden your understanding of others."[ibid]

Comparing the choice of books in 1988 English GCSE syllabuses for the Southern Examining Group[2a] and the London and East Anglian Examining Group[3], I can't help feeling that this process is not widely understood. The number of works offered by black authors or about black experience seems to suggest rather that a criterion of proportional representation is at work, i.e. the fewer the black students in the local population, the fewer the books offered reflecting black experience. How otherwise can one account for the Southern Group offering only 4 out 121 books by black writers (little over 3%), while London and the East Anglian Group offered 13 out of 96 (13.5%)? When one adds the books by white writers reflecting something of black experience, the comparison still more or less holds – less than 6% of Southern region's books and up to 19% for London. Should we not deduce from the S.E.G. list that some form of cultural apartheid is at work?

A further feature which is thoroughly disturbing is the S.E.G.'s actual treatment in a 1988 specimen paper of Samuel Selvon's A BRIGHTER SUN[2b]. Students are asked to comment on people in Trinidad in terms of "the customs of the different races, their attitude to life and work ...". Presumably students are meant to make generalisations on the basis of the behaviour and attributes of characters in the novel. What is this other than an invitation to stereotype? The specimen answer includes statements such as "Indians tend to be private, conservative, industrious, rustic. Negroes tend to be more easy-going and urbanised ...". Serious questions clearly need to be raised about the natureof the lenses through which readers are here being

encouraged to view Selvon's text. My focus, however, in this paper will be primarily on the texts themselves.

Coretta King writes about the importance of a literary heritage. Although books may form only a small part of the cultural influences on children, they are, nevertheless, a significant reflection of the current values that adult society thinks appropriate to pass on to its young. Prime evidence of this role was revealed in the national furore over the little book JENNY LIVES WITH ERIC AND MARTIN[4]. Now we have Section 28 to help prevent children who live in lesbian or homosexual households having their reality reflected in children's books.

What then is the nature of our children's library heritage here in Britain? A very different one from Coretta King's: with its strong focus on the struggles against slavery, colonialism, injustice and the oppression of black people; with its search for links between black culture in America and roots in Africa. Those of us who are descendants of Europe, on the other hand, are part of the society which initiated and perpetuated that slavery, colonialism, injustice and oppression of black people. I am a very direct example of this, my family having been part of the colonial arm which extended its gold-seeking fingers to the southern-most part of Africa.

A great deal of literature for young people written in the colonial era commonly drew on colonial imagery. Apart from the passing references to 'niggers' which one comes across in authors as august as C. Day Lewis and William Golding, Africa provided a great symbolic arena for imagery of darkness, fear and danger. Was it not the home of 'cannibals', 'primitives' and 'savages' – a testing ground for English courage and ingenuity? The French trenches of the First World War, the gas chambers of World War Two – these never caught the imagination of countless writers for children in the same way as Africa. We might ask ourselves why.

Images of black people, as represented by white writers in colonial times, fall into three main categories. Black people were depicted:

— as savages (e.g. W.E. Johns and Willard Price's ubiquitous 'baddies', usually counterpoised by a 'good black' acting as servant or guide to the white heroes);
— as comic buffoons (Lofting's Prince Bumpo and the King and Queen of Jolliginki);
— as faithful servants/slaves (Defoe's Man Friday, Joel Chandler Harris's original Uncle Remus, Willard Price's 'good blacks').

All three characterisations served a particular function – to dehumanise, to rationalise and justify the oppression of black people to each new generation of young readers. Whether the creators of these images were actually conscious or unconscious of the process is irrelevant. The effect remains the same – that of conveying a set of social perceptions and attitudes to a new generation.

It is interesting what Julius Lester has to say about Uncle Remus and the Brer Rabbit black American folk-tales which Joel Chandler Harris collected so conscientiously in the latter part of the nineteenth century:

> "It is questionable whether the tales would have been so popular if Harris had not created a character named Uncle Remus ... As a character, Uncle Remus represents the 'faithful darkie' who, in Harris's words, 'has nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery'. He identifies wholly with his white master and mistress, espouses their value system and is derisive of other blacks. There are no inaccuracies in Harris's characterisation of Uncle Remus.

> **Even the most cursory reading of the slave narratives collected by the Federal Writer's Project of the 1930s reveals that there were many slaves who fit the Uncle Remus mould.**
>
> Uncle Remus became a stereotype and, therefore, negative – not because of inaccuracies in Harris's characterisation, but because he was used as a symbol of slavery and a retrospective justification for it. This reflected the times in which Uncle Remus tales appeared.[5]

Perhaps the archetypal tale within South African children's literature which offers endless examples of black people depicted in all three modes – savage, buffoon and faithful servant – is JOCK OF THE BUSHVELD by Sir Percy Fitzpatrick[6]. Republished by Puffin Books in 1975, almost seventy years after the first publication in 1907, it is described as "a classic among animal stories and today it is as fresh and exciting as when it was first told". It is to be found in many school, public and, I am sure, private libraries. Does the book's dedication not suggest it will be a charming tale?:

> "... it is clear the duty, no less than the privilege, of the Mere Narrator to dedicate THE STORY OF JOCK to Those Keenest and Kindest Critics, Best of Friends and Most Delight of Comrades, THE LIKKLE PEOPLE."(ibid)

The book is largely devoted to the fiercely faithful 'character' of the dog Jock, while most of the black participants are shadowy figures who fetch and carry. The exception is 'Jim', portrayed by Fitzpatrick as Jock's "ally and companion". Indeed, he is the animal's counterpart:

> "His eyes glared like a wild beast's ..."
> "He was simply a great, passionate, fighting savage."(ibid)

To sketch briefly something of the book's background, I quote from a personal essay I wrote to accompany my short story *The Gun*, set in the same bushveld terrain:

> "To understand fully the racist perspective of this 'classic' tale, it is relevant to know that Fitzpatrick was a director of one of the most powerful mining companies that sprang up after the discovery of gold in the Transvaal. Indeed, he played a leading role in encouraging the British government to go to war in South Africa against the white Afrikaners, at the turn of the century. The aim was to ensure that the golden wealth was channelled into British hands.
>
> The raw gold had, of course, first to be channelled out of the earth by black hands. Millions of black men were to be forced, by a system of taxes and passes, to seek work below the earth, in sub-human conditions, as part of this process. Minimum expense, maximum profit. Millions of black families were to be broken. Millions of children were to see their fathers only once a year, at the end of their contracts. Millions of black people were to be arrested for offences under the 'pass' laws which controlled the flow of labour. Fitzpatrick played a direct part in establishing all this, stating that only the 'civilised' were entitled to rights. No wonder the black characters in his book are portrayed as uncivilised and animal-like. No need to be concerned about sending 'savages' into a living hell.[7]

It is in South African children's literature (marketed here, as well as in South Africa) that one can see most clearly the colonial predeliction for the humanisation of animals alongside the brutalisation of people.

However, the post-war international struggles for colonial freedom, as well as the massive uprising of black people in the United States and the Civil Rights movement in the early 1960s, were the precursors of change. The late sixties saw the emergence of a new generation of children's writers breaking free from the colonial condition.

In the United States, Julius Lester's seminal work TO BE A SLAVE was first published in 1968[8]. It was dedicated to his own slave ancestors. Significantly, his first books for children were, in fact, documentations of black history. BLACK FOLK-TALES followed in 1969, dedicated jointly to the great black American folklorist Zora Neale Hurston and to the politican Rap Brown[9]. The dedication of LONG JOURNEY HOME in 1972 reads "For those who went before and Alice Walker"[10]. Clearly and constantly, Lester was making connections between past and present. In his novel for young people, BASKETBALL GAME[11], the young central character desperately wants to defy the lessons of history passed on to him through parental warnings and to be able to make his own individual choices. The only son of the first black family to move into a white neighbourhood, he wants to respond sanely, rationally, to the white girl next door when she makes her overtures. Unfortunately, those who ignore history do so at their peril.

A writer of extraordinary imagination emerging in the early 1970s was Virginia Hamilton. A book like M.C. HIGGINS, THE GREAT[12], rooted in black people's experience, revealed – I am sure, for the first time in a work of children's literature – a great cultural richness and complexity of relationships tucked away under a slag heap of poverty on a desolate mountain in the Appalachians.

1973 saw the publication of THE FRIENDS – the first of Rosa Guy's wonderful trilogy – dedicated "To those who love, to those who want to love and to Walter"[13]. Walter Rodney, radical Guyanese historian and author of HOW EUROPE UNDERDEVELOPED AFRICA[14], was to be murdered seven years later. Such a dedication reveals the seriousness with which an author such as Guy undertook writing for young people and the interweaving of politics and expression. Not for her the disingenuous charades of Fitzpatrick. With THE FRIENDS, EDITH JACKSON[15] and RUBY[16], Rosa Guy gives us access into the back streets of New York and the lives of three young women struggling to make sense of their relationships and environment. We are exposed to the tensions of immigrant life, as Phylissia and her West Indian family come up against hostility from black Americans. Racism not only sustains the hierarchy, but is a cancer, indiscriminate about whose hearts it will ravage. We are exposed to the tension between generations and to the wide gamut of human weakness and failing. But we are also exposed to the tentative yet persistent searchings of young people to make new beginnings and new connections. Years later, Rosa Guy continues to explore these themes – as in her fable MY LOVE, MY LOVE (1985)[17].

In 1976, Mildred Taylor broke new ground with the publication of ROLL OF THUNDER, HEAR MY CRY[18]. Awarded the Newbery Medal for 1977, she spoke about her desire to present young readers with strong, positive images of black family life, even in the Depression of the thirties. She wanted to pay tribute to the courage of black people in overcoming hostile circumstances. There was no need for her to invent – her own family history provided her with her source material, as indicated by her dedication:

> "To the memory of my beloved father, who lived many adventures of the boy Stacey and who was in essence the man David."

The title of her sequel, LET THE CIRCLE BE UNBROKEN, speaks for itself, connecting once again present to past[19]. It is only when set against the background of this rich body of black American literature that one can properly place in perspective two books by white Americans in the liberal tradition, both published in 1969, the year after Lester's TO BE A SLAVE. One is Theodore Taylor's THE CAY[20] and the other William Armstrong's SOUNDER[21]. Both became best-sellers and the subject of films, yet seem to me to pale against these other works, suffering the limits of an essentially white-dominated perspective – THE CAY more obviously so than SOUNDER. They are, nevertheless, significant books in that they show white authors beginning to address the consequences of white racism. Theodore Taylor dedicated THE CAY:

> "To Dr. King's dream,which can only come true if the very young know and understand."[20]

A young white boy, Phillip, and an elderly black man, Timothy, are thrown together as survivors of a torpedo attack on a ship in the Caribbean of 1942. The boy's social lenses have been shaped by his mother's racist attitudes, but, having been blinded in the attack, he gradually learns to reperceive the black man. However, with his obvious nobility of spirit, Timothy comes too close to the portrayal of the faithful servant – and, indeed, the story ends with a fatal act of self-sacrifice. Writing about the story, based on a real account of a small boy seen drifting off into the darkness on a raft after the sinking of a Dutch ship in 1942, Taylor wrote:

> "I couldn't get it out of my mind. I wondered for ten years what had happened to this boy. I also wondered what might have happened had an adult been with him, a man of the sea, perhaps one with primal instinct.
>
> So the boy became Phillip Enright and the old man was Timothy. I blinded Phillip because I wanted him to live in a colourless world. It was not enough for him to leave the island with survival knowledge. Our country may be threatened with complete civil war over race relations. Only the new generations can straighten out this problem. So I wanted young readers to understand that colour is simply a matter of vision in its basic form."(ibid)

Apart from his questionable suggestion about Timothy's 'primal instincts', by setting the story in a sort of vacuum, Taylor seems to be implying that we can simply start afresh in black-white relations. The notion might be attractive to those white people who would prefer to throw a blanket over areas of history with which they are now uncomfortable. But black American authors have, in constrast, given us access to the past and its connections to the present. How can we begin anew without facing up to what has gone before?

William Armstrong's SOUNDER differs notably from THE CAY in that it is based on black experience, although it is a story filtered, I suspect, through the circumstances of its first telling. The author, who is white, records how he was told the tale by an elderly black school teacher who taught him to read fifty years earlier – at the kitchen table. They grey-haired teacher worked for the author's father after school and in the summer – and had a fount of stories from Aesop, Homer, the Old Testament and history. It was autobiographical and here I think the kitchen table is significant. The tale was one of victimisation of a black father, a family's stoic struggle for survival and a boy's relentless search for his father. It was a tale of gross racism and injustice, being told by a black man to a white child in a kitchen around 1920. Perhaps it is because the experience was so personal and painful to the teller and because anonymity could offer a certain distancing and universality that the

central characters are referred to throughout as "the boy", "the mother", "the father". Only the dog, Sounder, has a personal name. It is a matter for speculation whether the same tale might have been told differently by the grey-haired teacher to a black child in 1920. What is more certain is that a black author re-telling the story in 1969 would have wanted to reflect not just features of stoic endurance but those of active resistance.

Moving on to British literature, it appears that developments in the States take a while to ricochet across the Atlantic. Our major breakthrough was in 1976 with the publication of Farrukh Dhondy's EAST END AT YOUR FEET[22], followed by COME TO MECCA in 1978[23]. For the first time we were given access to young black characters in an English setting, where one felt that their consciousness had not been filtered through a white perspective. The stories covered a whole range of complex issues confronting young people, one of which was racism.

White writers for children in the mid-1970s were, however, also beginning to consider black experience. Bernard Ashley was one of the first to create a central black character, in 1974, in THE TROUBLE WITH DONOVAN CROFT[24]. Donovan, the black child who is temporarily fostered by a white family while his mother returns to Jamaica to a dying parent, remains in a trauma and passive for almost the entire course of the book. The consciousness throughout is that of the white boy of the family who tangentally comes on the receiving end of the racism intended for Donovan. Ashley counters racist remarks within the book – for instance, through the white foster mother. However, the message coming across to young readers could well be simply one of white philanthropy.

In A KIND OF WILD JUSTICE[25], Ashley again was willing to expose rampant white racism, yet there are questions as to where the reader is placed by the author. The central character, Ronnie – who has the reader's sympathy as a victim of circumstance and a vicious gang – refers to Manjit, who shares his special reading lessons, in abusively racist language. At the end of the book, when Ronnie is at the beginning of some sort of reintegration of his social life, it is Manjit and her family who are left forever on the outside. Ashley might choose to argue that he was simply being realistic, but had a writer tackled the theme from a black perspective would we not have ended up with an intense sense of anger rather than resigned pessimism? How does it feel to a young black reader hearing what is going through Ronnie's mind and not to feel that there is any counter to it in the text? Are white and black readers not likely to have very different responses to such books in which black people just remain victims? Was Ashley perhaps only conceiving a white readership? Questions like these reveal how closely literature necessarily links into society. Fragmentation of a society will be reflected in its literature.

Jan Needle is a major white writer who, in 1978, decided to tackle racism head on in MY MATE SHOFIQ[26]. The book caused considerable offense to the British Council of Pakistanis, who were appalled at the articulation of anti-Pakistani abuse. Much of it goes uncountered at the time – but, in the course of the novel, Bernard Kershaw, the white working-class boy, learns, as Farrukh Dhondy put it:

> "to unravel the skein of working-class prejudice about 'Pakis' through acquaintance with Shofiq's family and its problems." (CBB, June 1979)[27]

What, however, are readers to make of the racism as it occurs. Presumably, it will be highly offensive to some, while reinforcing the prejudices of others. One class of eleven-year-olds – many of them black – asked their teacher to stop reading. They

knew him to be strongly anti-racist and felt sufficiently free to question him. In fact, he was reading the book quite intentionally to elicit their responses. When challenged, his solution was to explain the structure of the novel, summarising the rest of the story and reading extracts. In contrast, I have also heard accounts of the book read in largely white secondary classes where teachers have been dismayed at the level of racism unleashed during the earlier chapters. Would those students really 'unravel the skein' of their *past* responses as the novel progresses or is this expecting an unrealistically high level of sophistication? Some critics have also argued that Shofiq will merely be seen by many white readers as the exception – an individual who has proved himself to be OK on white terms. Nevertheless, I find the final comment of Dhondy's review on the book extremely interesting:

> "Its positive strength is that it doesn't see Asians as victims. Shofiq is probably the first book written for children in Britain which tackles race and refuses to fall into community relations bathos. It will probably be the last such book, because Needle has exhaustively assaulted the homilies. A black writer couldn't have tackled the same subject, nor should a black writer, West Indian or Asian attempt to. It is easier for Needle to enter the eye of that storm or even Bernard Kershaw." (CBB, June 1979)

Dhondy's reaction to Needle's subsequent collection of stories A SENSE OF SHAME[28] very much mirrored my own. I found it worrying that the slices of life, however much they revealed racism, were simply slices of white consciousness. Dhondy put it this way:

> "The stories are not about blacks, about women, about Asians, they are about the reactions – good, bad, piggist, natural, irrational, ironic – of the British white middle and working-class characters to them ... The problem with the form Needle has chosen is that it leaves the 'black' characters cocooned in mystery, whereas the tensions in the whites are explored with intimacy."[29]

There are a number of other white authors who should be mentioned, although I have not the space to be comprehensive. Marjorie Darke, an excellent storyteller, takes us back to some of the historical roots of black experience in Britain in her interconnected novels THE FIRST OF MIDNIGHT[30] and A LONG WAY TO GO[31]. She is also noted for her strong female characters. Geraldine Kaye is an established writer who has moved from simply writing tales about children in other cultures to taking on more of a social and political dimension, as in COMFORT HERSELF[32] and A BREATH OF FRESH AIR[33]. The latter involves Amy, a young girl in contemporary Bristol, who, by an imaginative device of the author, finds herself back in time, reliving the experiences of a recaptured runaway slave. Amy's father is black, her mother is white – and she is concerned with making connections between past and present. To understand her personal history she has to understand her society's history. The book raises interesting questions about a writer's access to the language and experience of other cultures. How does a writer from one cultural background get the language of others to sound right? It is certainly not impossible, but my feeling is that Kaye is at her weakest when recreating the black slaves.

Rhodri Jones has now written a number of books in which he attempts not only to address issues of racism but to have some of his characters speaking in Creole. I find, however, a certain narrow artifice in his character creation, which shows up clearly against a novel like BAD FRIDAY by the young black Birmingham writer Norman Smith[34]. Smith's characters are full of the complexities of real human beings, their

dialogue presenting a genuine challenge to readers not familiar with Creole. Similarly, the limits of Jones' characterisation can be compared with the vibrancy of black writer Millie Murray's slice-of-life renderings in her teenage novel KIESHA[35].

A black writer whose contribution should be mentioned is Rukshana Smith. SUMITRA'S STORY[36], in 1982, opened up the dilemma of a young Asian girl from Uganda, trying to carve out her own identity while caught between the traditional values of her parents and the often hostile new society. A year later Rukshana Smith attempted to enter the consciousness of a young girl artist of Jamaican parentage in RAINBOWS OF THE GUTTER[37], a novel directly concerned with the responses of young black people to racism in Britain. Her theme is powerful, but, written in the first person, the authenticity of her central character's language is at times problematic. She continues her focus on racism in SALT ON THE SNOW[38] – and there are other writers also with this concern. However, I feel we are still waiting for a British novel of equivalent stature to ROLL OF THUNDER, HEAR MY CRY.

A field in which black writers are making an increasing contribution to children's literature is poetry. Poets such as John Agard, Grace Nichols and James Berry are able to draw richly on childhood experiences in Caribbean cultures, although, as James Berry writes in an introduction to his poetry in WHEN I DANCE:

> "The poems reflect two cultures in texture of experience and voice. Sometimes the content is distinctly British, other times Caribbean – then, also, other times the experiences merge."[39]

Poetry has been an extremely important medium for the expression of black experience and one being used by young people themselves. From often very small beginnings in community presses, some of this poetry is at last beginning to find an outlet through main stream publishing. Black and community bookshops-cum-publishers – such as New Beacon Books, the Walter Rodney Bookshop (Bogle L'Ouverture Publications) and Centreprise in London – have been central to this development.

In putting together my anthology FREE AS I KNOW[40], one of my primary concerns was to give access to voices frequently ignored. My focus was on young people developing their own consciousness both of their societies and themselves. I deliberately sought to include little-known work by young writers. The book's title came from a line in a poem by Accabre Huntley, published when she was ten in her first collection AT SCHOOL TODAY:

> I am black as I thought
> My lids are as brown as I thought
> My hair is curled as I thought
> I am free as I know[41]

The poem mirrors an assured self-reflection, the complete antithesis of colonial caricature. In my own writing for young people, much of it located in South Africa, I am very conscious that I am a white writer attempting to convey something of black experience. I became involved in writing because of the extensive misrepresentation of apartheid in British children's books, as well as the stunted nature of children's literature in a South Africa dominated by racism, censorship and a white-oriented market. In CENSORING REALITY[42], I focussed on the portrayal of South Africa in non-fiction. However, it was my membership of an education group attached to the British Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa that launched me into writing

fiction and JOURNEY TO JO'BURG[43]. We felt an urgent need for literature which would be directly accessible to children and which would speak to their hearts. I volunteered to write a story. As a child, I had simply accepted the lenses most white adults passed on to me, distorting my vision of the reality all around. Racism segregates our lives, our experiences, our perceptions, our vision. Now I remain fuelled by anger at the distortion and am determined to use my imagination at least to challenge that segregation. I am conscious of using writing to explore what it means to be oppressed and to resist the oppression. It is a journey of exploration on which I want to take my young readers. We await, however, a body of children's literature written with the insider's eye, from the pens of black South Africans themselves. They are emerging – such as Es'kia Mphahlele's rich tale FATHER COME HOME[44] – but are difficult to get hold of in Britain. What we have to be wary of is the import of white angst for teenagers and "a rash of cute tales about little black boys"[45] for younger readers by white writers still locked into their sick society.

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